



**WORLD FEDERATION
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Position Paper on the right of deaf people to choose and access International Sign interpretation services

International Sign version



24 March 2025

Key points

- Deaf people have the right to choose services and service providers according to their individual requirements and personal preferences, and individualised support should be flexible enough to adapt to their requirements.
- Deaf people must be the primary determinants of their accessibility needs and this includes their language preferences such as choosing for the provision of International Sign or a national sign language, and also to the preferences in terms of sign language interpreters and/or service providers.
- States parties should, among other measures, allocate resources to the development of appropriate and sufficient person-directed/"user"-led and self-managed support services for all deaf persons, such as professionally trained sign language interpreters, in line with Article 9 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).
- The regulation of IS interpreting services is in its infancy and currently lacks robust regulation and quality controls, and the pool of skilled and professional-level IS interpreters is scarce globally, especially in the Global South. IS interpreting costs in this region should reflect regional cost of living standards.
- The primacy of deaf people's access rights as a marginalised group must be recognised since the market-driven demand for IS interpretation services is outstripping the limited supply, capacity, and capability of qualified IS interpreters, which risks having an adverse effect.



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- The organisation/body organising or providing the event/education program shall closely consult with deaf participants as well as with national/regional/local associations of the deaf in line with Article 4.3 of the CRPD.
- The body organising the event/education should plan and budget for the IS interpretation at the earliest stage of the preparation of an event to ensure engagement with deaf participants on their needs and covering interpreting service fees and any associated costs such as travel and accommodation.
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Introduction

The World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) is aware of situations where deaf students in international university programs have sought unsuccessfully to access their university education in International Sign (IS). Likewise, the WFD has been informed about issues faced by deaf professionals attending international meetings and events abroad where their request for IS interpretation was denied. Those issues do not arise only in education and employment settings, but also in all other areas of deaf people's lives in society.

Considering the global trends in studying and working abroad, the use of IS in expanding domains and the complexities of IS interpreting services, the WFD has developed this position paper on the right to choose for and access to International Sign interpretation services. The evolving nature of deaf people's needs to access IS and IS interpreting services necessitates regular discussion, reflection and review of the information and views expressed here.

The WFD has position papers and statements outlining deaf people's right to sign language, education and participation in society including employment. The WFD's vision is "A world where deaf people everywhere can sign anywhere" and its focus is on the realising human rights, linguistic rights and self-determination of deaf people and Deaf communities.



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The right to sign language encompasses the right of every deaf person to learn, to use, and to be provided with national sign language in their participation in society¹. The WFD has supported the legal recognition of national sign languages for several decades and currently over 70 countries have achieved legal recognition of their national sign languages.² The WFD strongly endorses the learning and teaching of national sign languages as L1 languages³, especially for deaf children⁴, and does not support the unification of countries national sign languages⁵.

However, there are contexts in which deaf people may express the need to have access to and use International Sign (IS)⁶. This is particularly the case in international contexts and/or situations where deaf people from different countries are entering into contact with each other. The right of deaf people to use IS interpreting services must be considered on an individual basis according to the preferences of the deaf person. However, the WFD shares a clear position with the World Association of Sign Language Interpreting (WASLI) regarding IS: it cannot replace the primacy of the national sign languages in the lives of deaf people and especially the acquisition and use of a national sign language as L1 for deaf people. This position paper does not address the language rights of deaf people but focuses on the right of deaf people to choose their accessibility provisions of language and interpreting services in international contexts among others. The present position paper provides the legal framework on this right and identifies issues for consideration in accessing IS interpreting services.

¹ The WFD uses the wording “National sign language” instead of “sign language” to ensure that governments and relevant parties address the right of deaf people to the sign language(s) used in their country/region.

² The Legal Recognition of National Sign Languages, accessed on 15th October 2023, <https://wfdeaf.org/news/the-legal-recognition-of-national-sign-languages/>

³ “L1” refers to the first language used by a person, in this case, national sign language should be provided as the deaf child’s first language.

⁴ WFD Position Paper on Access to National Sign Language as a Health Need, <https://wfdeaf.org/news/position-paper-on-access-to-national-sign-languages-as-a-health-need/>

⁵ [January 2007: Statement on the Unification of Sign Languages - WFD \(wfdeaf.org\)](https://wfdeaf.org/news/position-paper-on-access-to-national-sign-languages-as-a-health-need/)

⁶ WFD Position Paper on International Sign: to be developed.



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International legal framework

The deaf community presents unique intersectionality between the disability community and those communities which identify as cultural and linguistic minorities. The Deaf Community belongs to both the group of persons with disabilities and the group of linguistic and cultural minorities⁷. The present paper will address both intertwined perspectives as encompassed in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) is the first international legal framework that explicitly recognises the fundamental human rights of deaf people and the importance of national sign languages in their participation in society, especially in its articles 2, 9, 21, 24, and 30. States Parties to the Convention are required to undertake measures to ensure the implementation of those provisions, read conjointly with the other provisions of the Convention.

The Convention defines languages as including sign languages next to spoken languages, in article 2. Sign languages are recognised as fully fledged natural languages, structurally distinct from spoken languages, alongside which they coexist⁸. States Parties shall take appropriate measures, under article 9, to ensure deaf people's access, on an equal basis with others, to all aspects of society in sign language, such as access to health care services, employment, and education, through the use of sign language and access to professional sign language interpretation services⁹. Article 21 of the Convention requires States Parties to officially recognise national sign languages in their legislation and other measures, as well as to promote their use, especially in all forms of official interaction and access to information¹⁰. Moreover, the linguistic identity of deaf persons must be promoted¹¹ and the learning of sign language must be facilitated by the States parties, according to article 24. Article 30 of the Convention recognises and confers deaf people and deaf communities the status of cultural and linguistic minorities. States parties are required to undertake measures to promote deaf culture¹².

⁷ WFD Position Paper on Deaf Community as Linguistic Identity or Disability, <http://wfdeaf.org/news/resources/wfd-position-paper-complementary-diametrically-opposed-situating-deaf-communities-within-disability-vs-cultural-linguistic-minority-constructs/>

⁸ United Nations General Assembly, Resolution on International Day of Sign Languages, A/RES/72/161.

⁹ CRPD Committee, General Comment n°2 on Article 9: Accessibility.

¹⁰ CRPD Committee, Guidelines on treaty-specific document to be submitted by states parties under article 35, paragraph 1, of the CRPD.

¹¹ CRPD Committee, Guidelines on treaty-specific document to be submitted by states parties under article 35, paragraph 1, of the CRPD.

¹² CRPD Committee, Guidelines on treaty-specific document to be submitted by states parties under article 35, paragraph 1, of the CRPD.



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The rights of deaf people to access and use sign language as addressed in articles 2, 9, 21, 24 and 30 must be read conjointly with article 19 of the Convention encompassing the right to live independently and be included in the community. The principles lying under this right are individual autonomy, self-determination and the freedom to make one's own choices, as enshrined in the first of the General Principles in the CRPD¹³. Concretely it means that deaf people should have the freedom of choice and control over decisions affecting their life with the maximum level of self-determination and interdependence within society¹⁴, especially when being provided access services, such as sign language interpretation services. They have the right to choose services and service providers according to their individual requirements and personal preferences, and individualised support should be flexible enough to adapt to the requirements of the "users" and not the other way around¹⁵. This right is an economic, social and cultural right, subject to the progressive realisation by the States parties that are required to take steps to the maximum of their available resources¹⁶.

However, States parties must ensure that no discrimination occurs among deaf people when they are asking for the provision of sign language interpretation services. The elimination of discrimination, including the lack or refusal of provision of reasonable accommodation, is not subject to the progressive realisation and must be immediately accounted for by the States parties¹⁷. They have a positive obligation in preventing/refraining others to discriminate against deaf people in their right to choose the services appropriate to their needs.

To achieve self-determination and freedom of choice of deaf persons, States parties should, among other measures, allocate resources to the development of appropriate and sufficient person-directed/"user"-led and self-managed support services for all deaf persons, such as professionally trained sign language interpreters¹⁸.

The CRPD's article 4.3 requires States parties to meaningfully engage with the Organizations of Persons with Disabilities¹⁹, including National Associations of the Deaf, in any legislation, program and policies concerning deaf people and sign languages. Governments and other parties should "closely consult with and actively involve" deaf persons through their representative organisations as part of the international human rights law recognising every

¹³ CRPD, Article 3(a), General Principles

¹⁴ CRPD Committee, General Comment N°5, par. 8.

¹⁵ CRPD Committee, General Comment N°5, par. 28.

¹⁶ CRPD Committee, General Comment N°5, par. 41.8

¹⁷ CRPD Committee, General Comment N°5, par. 46.

¹⁸ CRPD Committee, General Comment N°5, par. 97 (k).

¹⁹ To be distinguished from "Organisations for Persons with Disabilities" and "Civil Society Organisations", see CRPD Committee, General Comment N°7, par. 13 and 14.



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deaf person's legal capacity to take part in decision-making processes based on their individual autonomy and self-determination²⁰. Furthermore, when providing services, States parties should explore partnerships with organisations of persons with disabilities to gain inputs from the users of services themselves²¹. It can also be noted here that the World Federation of the Deaf is the international organisation representing the international Deaf community's interests and its advice, such as articulated in this paper, can provide guidance in international contexts.

Issues for consideration in accessing IS interpreting services

In most situations, deaf people's rights of access are realised through their national sign language and wherever possible and practicable, a national sign language interpreting services should take precedence over IS interpreting services. However, there may be some situations where IS may provide the best means for realising a deaf person's access rights. The following outlines considerations and provides guidance on issues that should inform decision-making in such situations:

a) Deaf people's rights of access

Deaf people's rights of access are upheld in various international human rights instruments, including the CRPD, and national non-discrimination laws and statutes. The principle of accessibility enshrined in the CRPD is considered a disability-specific reaffirmation of the social aspect of the right of access²². Deaf people have the right to access to information in accessible formats such as sign language, and this shall be promoted by the States Parties among the private entities that offer facilities and services open or provided to the public²³.

In order to avoid accessibility measures that are not suitable to the deaf person's/people's needs, the organising body or the event/education providers must engage the deaf person/people on their specific needs for that event/situation (see below regarding the case of multiple or conflicting needs).

The organisation/body organising or providing the event/education program (hereinafter "organising body") must ensure that its facilities and services open or provided to the public take into account all aspects of accessibility, including interpretation in national sign language and/or International Sign.

²⁰ CRPD Committee, General Comment N°7, par. 21.

²¹ CRPD Committee, General Comment N°7, par. 57.

²² CRPD Committee, General Comment N°2, par. 3.

²³ UNCRPD, article 9.



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The obligation to provide access shall be addressed at the earliest stage possible, through for example, the establishment of a specific interpretation budget, the consultation of national/regional/local associations of the deaf, and the establishment of a procedure to identify the needs of the individual deaf participants.

A lack of understanding of, and/or appropriate implementation of access rights can result in deaf people being provided with inappropriate and/or unqualified interpretation services and/or end up having to find funding sources to pay for interpreting services that are the responsibility of the organising body and/or government/authorities.

b) Deaf people's freedom of choice and individual autonomy

As outlined in the CRPD, deaf people's individual autonomy and the freedom to make one's own choices are essential to realising their human rights. This reflects the critical concept of deaf people being the experts in their own experiences and the community's catch-cry "Nothing about us, without us".

The right to access information and communication is closely connected to the deaf person's individual autonomy and self-determination of their lives. Access is achieved in different ways for different people in different situations, and varies on an individual basis. Depending on the person and the situation, access rights may be achieved via one's own national sign language or in International Sign. To determine which interpretation services to provide, the body organising the event must follow the guidance principle that is to enable the deaf persons' freedom of choice and decision-making in any situation.

The human rights approach requires the prioritisation of those in the most marginalised situations who face the biggest barriers to realising their rights. Thus, in situations where there are tensions between the considerations/requests of an organisation or service providers (eg: interpreting service providers), the deaf person's considerations/requests should be prioritized. Deaf people must be the primary determinants of their accessibility needs. This means engaging deaf people early and throughout considerations and planning for their access measures; and giving primacy to deaf people's views in all decision-making on this. This relates to language preferences such as choosing for the provision of International Sign or a national sign language, and also to the preferences in terms of sign language interpreters and/or service providers.

Where there are multiple deaf people impacted (e.g.: multiple deaf people attending an international event/meeting/education program) all the deaf people involved should be engaged early and throughout the considerations and planning for their access measures. The body responsible for organising and making accessible the event/meeting/education program should facilitate processes that enable discussion and joint decision-making



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among the impacted deaf participants. Where this is not practical such as in the case of large events, e.g.: international webinars expecting a large number of deaf participants, the body responsible for organising and making accessible their event/webinar should engage any deaf people with lead roles in the event and/or relevant organisations representative of deaf people's voices for advice on IS interpreting measures for that event/webinar.²⁴ However, in both cases, the decision to provide interpretation services should not be limited to providing either International Sign or a national sign language interpretation as there may be some situations that require both.

Where there are different and/or conflicting needs/preferences of multiple deaf people the organising body's facilitation processes should enable the deaf participants collaboration towards identifying priorities and solutions and engaging organisations representing deaf people.

Overall, the body responsible for organising and making accessible the event should not discriminate against them and/or refuse to provide the reasonable accommodations required by the majority or deaf people's identified participation priorities. The scope of application of the obligation to provide sign language interpretation services as a reasonable accommodation depends on the context and the resources available and shall not constitute an undue burden (time, budget, organisation's capacity, a.o.).

c) The lack of IS interpreting qualifications and professional regulation

There are no qualifications for teaching IS. Some academic courses offer an introduction to IS, a few interpreter training programs also include some training in IS interpreting and there are some community-level courses. However, there are currently no standardised IS courses that accredits or qualifies a person to teach or interpret IS.

Regulation of IS interpreting services is in its infancy and currently lacks robust regulation and quality controls. Since there is a need to set, maintain, and promote standards in IS interpretation, as well as promote a quality-assurance system for credentialing practitioners and maintain a register of IS interpreters to facilitate the search and recruitment of IS interpreters, the WFD and WASLI established an accreditation system²⁵.

The accreditation is intended for practitioners who are formally recognised or registered interpreters at the national level, have a university degree, are proficient in International Sign, in a national sign language and national spoken and/or written language, and have five years of experience in interpreting for conferences or high-level meetings at the

²⁴ CRPD Article 4.3.

²⁵ <https://wfdeaf.org/our-work/wfd-wasli-international-sign-interpreter-accreditation/>



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national level as well as three years of experience in IS interpreting in similar contexts at the international or regional level. Those practitioners can receive an accreditation as IS interpreters following an assessment process run jointly by the WFD and WASLI. However, this accreditation system is not training- or certification-based, yet it provides a quality-assurance system for credentialing practitioners who can be recruited as IS interpreters at international conferences and high-level meetings taking place at an international level.

c) Increasing demand for IS interpreting services with limited supply

Deaf people's participation in international organisations and events, such as at the United Nations, the European Union, and the Council of Europe, has been increasing. This is critical for achieving equality of deaf people's participation in leadership, governance and decision-making roles. However, this conversely creates a growing demand for professional IS interpreting services. Additionally, more deaf students and professionals are expanding the scope of their mobilities beyond national borders and attending international education programmes/transnational training/international events that is also contributing to an increased demand for professional IS interpreters.

It must be noted that the pool of skilled and professional-level IS interpreters is very small globally, especially in the Global South. The capacity and capability constraints of the IS interpreting service workforce makes it difficult to meet the increasing demand.

The cost of IS interpreting services can be very high and risks being prohibitive to deaf people achieving their access rights. The high costs can be driven by the market demand outstripping supply; and by the often high-pressured or highly public nature of the international situation/event, and international challenges including working across different time zones and events requiring in-person IS interpreting can add significant travel expenses. The body organizing the event/education should therefore plan and budget for the IS interpretation at the earliest stage of the preparation of an event to ensure engagement with deaf participants on their needs and covering interpreting service fees and any associated costs such as travel and accommodation. Additionally, IS interpreting costs should reflect regional cost of living standards especially in the Global South.

There is a need to ensure the primacy of deaf people's access rights where market driven demand and supply issues risk adversely affecting rights of access for deaf people as a marginalised group. For example, high IS interpreting service fees could create barriers to accessibility rights. Acknowledging that the human rights approach requires the prioritisation of those experiencing the greatest barriers to realising their rights.



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Recommendations

- Recommendation 1: Ensure the primacy of deaf people's views in all decision-making processes regarding their access to an international event/meeting/education program, and guarantee their freedom of choice and personal autonomy in the identification of their language access needs and service providers.
- Recommendation 2: Guarantee the obligation of organisations/bodies organising the international event/meeting/education program to provide accessibility and reasonable accommodation measures including requested interpretation services based on the individual request of deaf persons following their language need and preferences as expressed in the context of the event/meeting/programme.
- Recommendation 3: Ensure the primacy of deaf people's access rights and avoid the limited capacity and capability of the IS interpreting service workforce, including market-driven demand issues, adversely impacting on deaf people's rights of access.
- Recommendation 4: Plan a specific budget for national sign language/IS interpreting costs in the design phase of an international event/meeting/education programme, ahead of the preparation phase, to ensure sufficient funds to cover the costs. Additionally the IS interpreting costs should reflect regional cost of living standards, especially in the Global South.

Acknowledgments

Dr. Joseph J. Murray, Ms. Victoria Manning, Ms. Delphine le Maire

About the World Federation of the Deaf

The World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) is an international non-governmental organisation representing and promoting approximately 70 million deaf people's human rights worldwide. The WFD is a federation of deaf organisations from 137 nations; its mission is to promote the human rights of deaf people and full, quality and equal access to all spheres of life, including self-determination, sign language, education, employment and community life. WFD has a consultative status in the United Nations and is a founding member of International Disability Alliance (IDA).

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